

## ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННАЯ ИСТОРИЯ К СТОЛЕТИЮ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ В РОССИИ

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### ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI AND THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

This article reinterprets the alleged “utopianism” of Russian revolutionaries, especially the Bolsheviks, through the prism of an alternative definition of the utopian imagination developed only after 1917 — especially in the work of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. This alternative definition of utopia is as a critical analysis of conventional constructions of reality, time, and the possible. This is utopia as critical negation of that which merely *is* in the name of what should be, as a radical challenge to assumptions about what is possible and impossible in the present, as a vision of time and history as containing the possibility of an explosive “leap in the open air of history” (Benjamin). Utopian consciousness breaks into the normativized world of knowledge and expectations about reality and possibility in history to reveal the new and unexpected. This is utopia as radical epistemology, hermeneutics, and praxis.

In this article and two following, this alternative definition is concretized in the Russian revolution through three individuals: Alexandra Kollontai (in the present article), Lev Trotsky, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Of course, like all Marxists, they denied they were “utopians”. Which was accurate only by the definitions they had available to them at the time. However, in the utopian mode, they refused to accept the arguments of those who warned that a leap toward the “kingdom of freedom” was utopian fancy. They devoted their lives to the negation of that which merely *is*. They disturbed what Bloch called the “darkness of the lived moment”, in order to smash the barrier holding back the “ocean of possibility”.

Kollontai articulated a moral and historical vision of a radically alternative self and society created through experience and applied this both to women's intimate lives and to workers' struggles for “freedom”, “self-activity”, and “creativity.” She explored the possibility of a communist society that would allow humanity to leap across the “*zapovednyi rubezh*” (forbidden border) of normative economic laws and necessity into a world of freedom. Refs 43.

**Keywords:** Alexandra Kollontai, the Russian revolution, utopianism, Russian revolutionaries.

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АЛЕКСАНДРА КОЛЛОНТАЙ И УТОПИЧЕСКИЕ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЯ  
В РОССИЙСКОЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ

В статье переосмысливается «утопизм» русских революционеров, особенно большевиков, через призму альтернативного определения утопического воображения, введенного только после 1917 г. преимущественно в трудах Эрнста Блоха, Вальтера Бенямина и Теодора Адорно. Согласно этому определению утопия — критический анализ обычных конструкций реальности, времени и возможного, утверждение должного и сокрушающий вызов предположениям о возможном и невозможном в настоящем, особое видение времени и истории. Утопическое сознание буквально врывается в стандартизированный мир знаний и предположений о реальности и ее потенциях в истории, раскрывает новое и неожиданное. Такая утопия — это радикальные эпистемология, герменевтика и практика.

Подобного рода утопизм реализуется в русской революции через три личности: Александра Коллонтай, Льва Троцкого и Владимира Маяковского. Безусловно, как и все марксисты, начиная с основателей, они отрицали свой «утопизм». Это было справедливо с точки зрения терминологии времени, понимания того, что есть утопия. Однако, исходя из своей модели будущего, они не только не принимали предостерегающих аргументов тех, кто считал прыжок в сторону «царства свободы» утопией, но и посвятили жизнь отрицанию «наличного бытия» — разрушению того, что Э. Блок назвал «темнотой проживаемого мгновения», чтобы разбить барьер, сдерживающий «океан возможностей».

А. Коллонтай сформулировала нравственное и историческое видение радикально настроенного альтернативного «я» и созданного на основе опыта общества, применила это видение как к личной жизни женщин, так и к борьбе трудящихся за «свободу», «самостоятельность» и «творчество». Она исследовала в общечеловеческом масштабе возможность коммунистического общества «прыгнуть» через «заповедный рубеж» экономических законов и необходимости в мир свободы. Библиогр. 43 назв.

*Ключевые слова:* Александра Коллонтай, русская революция, утопизм, русские революционеры.

*The same leap in the open air of history is the  
dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.*

Walter Benjamin.  
On the Concept of History

It has long been commonplace to accuse the Bolsheviks of utopianism — with the term defined in the traditional way as fanciful desire and wishful illusion that ultimately justified coercion, brutal violence, and dictatorship and that led to dystopic catastrophe and eventual failure [Heller, Nekrich 1986; Malia 1994, Pipes 2001; Slezkine 2017]. Of course, like all traditional Marxists, the Bolsheviks refused the label of utopian, using it instead to castigate their opponents. Since Marx and Engels themselves, Marxists have insisted on their fact-based and rationalist view of social and economic relations and of the possibilities for change, on their “scientific” rather than “utopian” socialism. Engels mockingly described the mentality of the utopian socialist as believing that it was enough that socialism was “the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, and has only to be discovered to conquer all the world by virtue of its own power” [Engels 1918]. Among many Russian Marxist repudiations of utopian socialism, Lev Trotsky’s contemptuous dismissal in 1906 can stand as typical: it is faith in “miracles” rather than reliance in “facts”, and completely at odds with the flow of history, an attitude he judged to be “pathetic” [Trotskii 1990].

We need not accept these dismissive orthodox definitions of utopia. On the contrary, I would argue that they are obstacles to understanding the lived experience and thinking of people in the past as they made and participated in the Russian revolution, including the very Bolsheviks who rejected utopianism<sup>1</sup>. For this I turn to alternative definitions of utopia suggested by less orthodox and historically later Marxist thinkers, mostly associated with the Frankfurt School, especially Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. These philosophers were not as enamored with the nineteenth-century cult of scientific rationality as traditional Marxists and they were more open to recognizing the intellectual and political value of less “rational” ways of understanding reality and possibility. No less important, they were profoundly affected by the devastating experiences of the first half of the twentieth century, including two world wars and the Russian revolution itself. Indeed, precisely because they experienced the world in such a troubled and disenchanted condition, they sought new sources for hope and of the will to change. It says something of our own times, too, that their writings have received new attention as part of a renaissance of attention to utopia in both scholarly and public spheres. Indeed, my rendition of these ideas has been shaped by still later adaptations in the work of scholars in a variety of disciplines in the United States and Great Britain, especially Fredric Jameson, Ruth Levitas, Davina Cooper, and José Muñoz<sup>2</sup>.

In brief, this alternative definition is utopia as a critical analysis of our normative constructions of reality, of time, of the possible and impossible: as a view of human desire for a radically different world not as illusory wish but as a deep facet of human experience and consciousness, which produces radical knowledge, understanding, and action — utopia, in other words, as epistemology, hermeneutics, and praxis.

First, this utopia is a stance of “determined negation of that which merely is” in the name of “what should be”. As Bloch put it, the “utopian impulse” is a natural urge found in all human societies to “venture beyond” the limits and inadequacies of the world as it is given to them, beyond the “darkness of the lived moment”, to discover an emerging “not-yet”. Or, as he more lyrically wrote in his 1918 book *Spirit of Utopia*, utopia is an impulse, deep in the human psyche, to “summon what is not, build into the blue, build ourselves into the blue, and seek there the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears” [Something’s Missing 1988, p. 12; Bloch 1918, p. 9; Bloch 2000, p. 3; Bloch 1995, pp. 1–18, 287–316]. Because the merely factual, as he knew, is often a world of oppression, brutality, and suffering. Or what Walter Benjamin called the “state of emergency” in which we live that has become not the exception but the norm [Benjamin 2003, p. 392]. Utopian consciousness denormalizes the tolerated state of emergency.

Second, this utopia challenges what we imagine to be possible and impossible, what we assume to be the limits of “reality.” In Bloch’s words: “the ocean of possibility is much greater than our customary land of reality.” But because we are located so fully in our non-utopian present, in a world of expectations shaped more by what actually *is* than by what might be, we misrecognize the “not-yet” as the “impossible,” thinking we are simply being realistic [Something’s Missing 1988, p. 6; Jameson 2004, p. 46]. Utopian conscious-

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<sup>1</sup> Somewhat closer to my approach to utopianism in the Russian revolution [Stites 1989; Rosenberg 1990; Buck-Morss 2002].

<sup>2</sup> Key works include [Bloch 1918; Bloch 2000; Bloch 1995; Benjamin 1940; Eiland and Jennings 2003, pp. 389–411; Something’s Missing 1988; Levitas 1990; Levitas 2013; Jameson 2004; Jameson 2005; Muñoz 2009].

ness, in other words, breaks into the normativized world of expectations to turn our gaze toward the new and unexpected. Hannah Arendt made a similar point in writing about freedom as a “miracle” that “breaks into the world as an ‘infinite improbability’”, “unforeseeable and unpredictable” and yet inevitable given the natural impulses of humanity in a world where the “scales” of reality “are weighted in favor of disaster” [Arendt 2006, pp. 168–169].

Third, utopia challenges how we think about temporality, especially the time of history. Instead of the conventional view of historical time as linear, orderly, movement forward, as normative “straight time”, as José Muñoz called it (elaborating on Bloch), which “tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life”, utopian time is a “queer time”, which “steps out of the linearity of straight time” to discover “an ecstatic and horizontal temporality” that is “open to the world”, and thus to possibility [Muñoz 2009, pp. 22–25].

One way to visualize this open temporality, and link it to revolution, is Walter Benjamin’s famous image, in his 1940 “theses” on the concept of history (written during an especially dark time in history), of humanity’s “leap in the open air of history”. An adaptation of the original Marxist image of revolution as “a leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom”, Benjamin used the image of the “leap” to recognize that history is “open towards the future”, that it contains within itself the “redemptive” possibility of a “messianic time” that could suddenly “blast open the continuum of history”; i.e., the march of time where change can be only incremental and based on what already is, and to overcome a reality weighted toward “catastrophe” [Benjamin 2003, pp. 395, 397]. This, I think, is what Bloch had in mind when he wrote in 1918 that we “build ourselves into the blue”, in order, as he would later write, to build “beyond the day which has become” and thus see the “unbecome future,” the “not-yet”, which is the essence of utopian awareness [Bloch 1995, pp. 1–10]. And of revolution as praxis.

However, revolution can share this critical vision of reality, possibility, and time without making the leap into the unbecome future. As Benjamin suggested in an aside, as “paralipomena” to his “On the Concept of History”, revolution might be less a leap into the new than a gesture of refusal to accept any longer the catastrophe of the present: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train — namely the human race — to activate the emergency brake” [Benjamin 2003, pp. 4–402]. Or, changing metaphors again (for metaphors help our minds see what is hard to grasp in plain language), we can see revolution, in words of the Marxist literary theorist Fredric Jameson, as “a rattling of the bars” of necessity [Jameson 2005, pp. 232–233, and chapt. 13 “The Future as Disruption”]. What is essential in all these arguments and images is that revolutions disrupt assumptions that the future can appear only along the straight tracks where the present seems to be heading and allow us to see beyond our normalized visions of time and history. Put simply, utopia is this open disruption of the now, for the sake of possibility, not a closed map of the future. It is the leap not yet the landing.

There are many examples from the Russian revolution we could consider to concretize and historicize all this. In this essay, I want to focus on three individuals, all ostensibly Bolsheviks in 1917, who all denied that they were “utopians”: Alexandra Kollontai, Lev Trotsky, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. In different but comparable ways, along with many other participants in the revolution, they refused to accept the arguments of those who

warned that a leap toward the kingdom of freedom was utopian fancy. With vigorous energy and strong words, they devoted their lives to the “negation of that which merely is” in the name of “what should be”. In the most practical ways they could find, they disturbed the “darkness of the lived moment”, tried to smash the barrier holding back the “ocean of possibility”, or at least “rattled the bars of necessity”. In time — and time is a key theme for thinking about utopia — their impulses would collide with the stubbornness of the present, with the tenacious force of necessity. All three would find their dreams curtailed, their leap into the clear, free, and unpredictable open air of history grounded. But it is their early critical impulses, rather than their later disappointments, that this essay explores, for this was the utopian impulse so central to the experience of the Russian revolution for so many, and perhaps the meaning of the revolution for our own times, a century later.

Alexandra Kollontai began her fight against the world as it was in the intimate and gendered spheres so often dismissed by Russia’s revolutionaries as secondary and to which she often returned<sup>3</sup>. She defied the conventions of her class and her own parents’ will by declaring that she would marry only “out of a great passion”, which she believed she felt for an “impecunious young engineer” (and cousin) Vladimir Kollontai [Kollontai 1971, pp. 10–11]<sup>4</sup>. After a few years of marriage and the birth of their child, she grew disenchanted — she would later describe her feelings as arising from a growing awareness that the normative values of love, domesticity, and motherhood were not enough for a woman to enjoy the fullness of life [Kollontai 1971, pp. 11–12]. Her first public act in her new independent life was to write and publish a book on child-rearing, in which she argued, along familiar progressive lines, that parents should nurture and stimulate their children’s moral and intellectual independence, spirit of autonomy, and strength of will. A weak-willed person, she insisted, “will never take courage, will not have the desire to go against predominant beliefs; he will not begin to search for new ways, he will not begin to fight for new truths, and without such a fight... humanity will never go forward and no perfection will be possible” [Clements 1979, p. 21].

During the 1905 revolution, Kollontai wrote two pamphlets for workers describing the Marxist vision of the communist future and the path to realizing it. In a communist society, she explained, “all of today’s injustice and poverty” will be overcome, because production will be “for social and personal use” not private commercial gain, and the capitalist spirit of competition and egoism will be replaced by the communist spirit of cooperation and the common good. This was not a “fantasy” or an “empty dream,” she insisted. On the contrary, human history proves that “the whole order of things, all human relations” can be “refashioned.” But history also teaches us that refashioning the order of things requires more than the efforts of individual “people of good will.” It can only occur through the collective effort of the masses of “new people”: working-class people whose spirit of cooperation and equality, whose “resentment and hatred” of oppression, emerges

<sup>3</sup> The main English-language biographies [Clements 1979; Farnsworth 1980; Porter 1980]. For Kollontai’s own account (see: [Kollontai 1971; Kollontai 1921a, pp. 261–302; Kollontai 1974]). Many of Kollontai’s writings are available in the original in “Selected articles and speeches” (*Izbrannye stat'i i rechi*, 1972). Some works in Russian are available as links [*Sobranie sochinenii*], English translations are available in print (“Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai”, 1977) and on-line [The Marxists Internet Archive]. Works by Kollontai will be cited in my own translation.

<sup>4</sup> Before the book’s first publication in German in 1926, Kollontai excised from the galleys many of the more unorthodox phrases and passages. When I quote from these deleted sections, I indicate this in the notes below.

out of the very conditions of their present lives [Kollontai 1972a, pp. 32, 35–36, 42]. Life itself, she argued, teaches workers the evils of inequality and oppression, and creates “unconscious, instinctive” alternative ideals, a transformative “class psychology” [Kollontai 1972b, pp. 20–22, 25].

We can already see Kollontai’s distinctive emphasis and style in these standard Marxist arguments: greater stress on the centrality of moral and spiritual transformation; greater weight given to emotion, psychology, and experience; greater readiness to imagine the liberated future. We see these same orientations in two articles about Marxist morality and ethics written for educated readers. Rejecting the neo-Kantian argument that there are abstract moral absolutes existing in nature itself and the Nietzschean argument that the will of exceptional individuals can create new moral norms, Kollontai insisted on the Marxist view that ethics derive from social relations and social experience. Current society is dominated, she argued, by a “bourgeois morality” that idealizes individualism and the “unrestricted expression of one’s own ‘I’”, softened only by “compulsory” ideas of “duty” and “obligation.” However, deep within society, the experience and interests of proletarians leads them toward a new morality, toward an alternative ethics of “solidarity, unity, self-sacrifice, and the subordination of personal interests to the interests of the group”.

At this point, she pivoted even more fully toward the utopian: these counternormative proletarian values only hint at the truly new moral world to come. “In that new world, still far from us, there will no longer be a place for compulsion”, there will no longer be a place for ideas like duty, because “personal desire will coincide with social imperatives”. She sensed the utopian nature of her claims, but did not back away from them. Rather, she tried to show how they grew from observing concrete conditions: a “radical metamorphosis” of all current social and economic relationships was historically inevitable, which would produce a new economy and society based on community and solidarity, which would create a “social atmosphere” in which “a higher moral type of person, now inaccessible to us,” can be realized. The problem — the utopian fancy — was not the vision of a morally free and transcendent “superman”, but its impossibility in capitalist reality: but when social relations inevitably grow beyond the current norms of competing individuals and antagonistic classes, then the “new person” will be born, “the harmonious, whole, strong, and beautiful image of the true superman” [Kollontai 1905a, pp. 77–95 (esp. 80, 94); Kollontai 1905b, pp. 92–107, esp. 106–107; Kollontai 1906, p. 2, pp. 28–32, esp. 24–27, 30].

For Kollontai, talk of the “new person” and the “superman” concerned women especially. Her focus on women was in opposition to “bourgeois feminists,” who considered charity and educational uplift enough to improve the lives of women crushed under the burden of poverty and labor. But Kollontai’s position was even more at odds with her Marxist comrades in the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party, who believed that class struggle alone would free women. When Kollontai organized women workers during 1905–1907, her work was blocked, she recalled with bitterness, by both the “party center” and “rank-and-file comrades”, who reacted to her efforts with a mixture of fear and contempt: fear that attention to women’s needs would undermine socialist unity and contempt for work among women workers as a distraction from the main cause, as a sign of “hated feminism” [Kollontai 1977, p. 53; Kollontai 1971, p. 13].

But she persisted. In 1908, she organized a delegation of working women to participate in the First All-Russian Women’s Congress — a feminist gathering of mostly mid-



dle-class professional women. Social-Democratic party leaders insisted that workers and socialists should boycott the congress, a demand that Kollontai ignored. She did not disagree with the socialist critique of bourgeois feminists, especially their “above-class” fantasy that women of all classes should unite around the cause of democracy and suffrage. Indeed, her participation was mainly disruptive and performative. She did not expect to change the minds of the feminist majority, but considered a visible stance of dissent, which would culminate in a demonstrative walk-out of her group, to be morally important and politically instructive for working women.

Her speech to the congress was typical. What do mainstream feminists offer women tormented by “the triple burden of worker, homemaker, and mother”, she asked. Nothing but slogans, such as “become free in love and free in motherhood” and free of “age-old morals,” that have little bearing on the realities of most women’s lives and are mere fancies under capitalism. As long as the capitalist system of producing value through exploitation exists, the working woman cannot be a “free, independent personality, a wife who chooses her husband only by the dictates of her heart, a mother who can look to the future of her children without fear”. The goal of a true woman’s movement, she told the congress, must be nothing less than “the all-sided emancipation” of the woman “as a person and a human being”. And this will be impossible until women are freed from “the chains and slavery of capitalism” [Kollontai 1908, pp. 792–801]<sup>5</sup>.

Kollontai developed the moral, emotional, and utopian sides of her vision of women’s emancipation in a book she wrote for the congress. Here, she explicitly insisted that she was neither a moralist nor a utopian: “We willingly leave everything that belongs to the realm of ‘moral wish’ or other ideological constructions at the complete disposal of bourgeois liberalism. For us, the emancipation of women is not a dream, not even a principle, but a concrete reality, a fact that is daily coming into being” in “real-life relationships” [Kollontai 1909, p. 5]. What is “utopian”, using the familiar definition at the time — is the feminist belief that new and free forms of love, marriage, and family are possible without radically transforming the whole social system [Kollontai 1909, pp. 196, 198].

Kollontai’s language of argument was built around a moral vision, in the utopian mode, of a radically different self and society created through the experience of struggle against the darkness of the present. Only in the future socialist world of “harmony and justice”, she predicted, will women will experience “the joys and charms of life” that are denied them in the present. Women who do not “feel a strong faith in the coming of a more perfect social order”, suffer from their narrow view of what was real and possible: “the future of humanity must seem gray, dark, and hopeless”. Yes, the path to this future will be harsh and “thorny”, surrounded by “dangerous precipices” and “hungry predators”. But there is no other way to reach that “alluring, flickering goal in the distance — all-sided liberation in a renewed world of labor”, entry into a “new, bright temple of common labor, comradely solidarity, and joyful freedom”. This future is not a fantasy or a wish, because it is produced by the conditions and experience of the present: through suffering and struggle a woman transforms herself from a “humiliated, downtrodden slave without rights” into an “independent worker, an independent personality, free in love” [Kollontai 1909, pp. 109–110]. Of course, this transformation would remain incomplete in the “gloomy” reality of the present. The ideal of “free love,” promoted by radical feminists, was impossi-

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<sup>5</sup> Much of this speech was including in the introduction to her book [Kollontai 1909].

ble in the present society marked by inequality, exploitation, possessiveness, and property. Until the structure of “all human relations” and the “whole psychology of humanity” has changed, there could be no true freedom in love and no true spirit of comradely relations. This would require a different human spirit. But this was not a mere fancy: one could already “catch sight of pale glimmerings” of these future attitudes and future relationships in the lives of working-class women [Kollontai 1909, pp. 196–197]<sup>6</sup>.

Kollontai became more and more certain that the deepest human experiences of love and intimacy must be at the center of this transformative revolution. As her thoughts matured about the present and future of sex, morality, and the “new woman”, she wrote and published three important articles on these questions. No Russian Marxist had ever written so explicitly about gender, intimacy, or emotions, nor so strongly linked these questions to socialist revolution. (In 1918, she would republish these articles together as a book with few changes, for little had changed in her views or in conditions and attitudes.) She began with a human condition she had often experienced: loneliness. Taking up the common observation at the time that loneliness was the defining experience of modern urban life<sup>7</sup>, she pushed this cliché in a more radical direction: in the age of “capitalist property, class contradictions, and individualistic morality, we all live and think under the dark sign of inescapable and inevitable spiritual solitude”, especially in the “crowded, alluring and carousing, noisy and shouting cities”, even when among “close friends and comrades”. This modern condition drives one to “grab with sick greed at the illusion of a ‘congenial soul’” and be enchanted by the magic of “crafty Eros”. But disenchantment is inevitable, especially for women, for a “normal woman seeks in sexual intercourse completeness and harmony; the man, reared on prostitution, overlooking the complex vibrations of love’s sensations, follows only his pallid, monotone, physical inclinations”. The conditions of modern capitalist existence and the way bourgeois men and women learned to love degraded the “love act” from “the ultimate accord of complex spiritual feelings and emotional experience” into something “shameful, low, and coarsely animalistic”. Yet, Kollontai saw hope precisely in this “tragic” modern experience: “a longing [*toska*] for the ideal of the still unrealized future”, “the fresh scent of new strivings in life, rising from the social depths”<sup>8</sup>. These were her arguments in 1911, which she developed further in a key essay of 1913 titled “the new women”.

If salvation was a “new morality” created by “new people”, the fragmentary glimmerings of the new could be seen in the changing lives and mentalities of women. The harbinger of this future was the bold and independent “single woman” (*kholostaia zhen-shchina*) trying to make her way outside home and family, who “possesses a self-defining inner world, lives with the interests of a whole person, is externally autonomous and internally independent”. Her thoughts, emotions, and expectations are so radically new, so counternormative we would now say, that “our grandmothers and even our mothers could not have imagined” her. Although the evidence for this new woman was still mainly in fiction, these literary heroines are not “artistic fantasies” but reflections of a current reality

<sup>6</sup> See also discussions [Clements 1979, pp. 56–61; Farnsworth 1980, pp. 33–37].

<sup>7</sup> For example [Liberson 1909].

<sup>8</sup> From “On the old theme” (Na staruiu temu), and “Sexual morality and the social struggle” (Polovaia moral’ i sotsialnaia bor’ba), both published in *Novaia zhizn’* in 1911 and republished as “Relations between the sexes and social struggle” (Otnoshenie mezhdru polami i klassovaia bor’ba) and “The love and the new morale” (Liubov’ i novaia moral’) in “The New morale and working class” (Novaia moral’ i rabochii klass, 1918), quotations 40–41, 51. See also the discussion of these texts [Clements 1979, pp. 69–72].



in which the new woman is already a “real living fact” [Kollontai 1918a, pp. 3–6]<sup>9</sup>. This emerging new woman rejects gendered normativity: she understands the harm caused by “the feminine virtues on which she had been raised over centuries — passivity, submissiveness, compliance, softness”. She knows that life requires a personality defined by “action, fortitude, decisiveness, and toughness, in other words by those ‘virtues’ that were until now considered the property of men”. Unlike her mother and grandmothers, the new woman does “does not fear life” or “hypocritically wrap herself in the faded cloak of female virtue”. She “demands from fate her share of personal happiness”. But “emotionality” and intimacy do not define her: she treats love and passion as only a single “dimension” of the richness of “life experiences”, no longer, as for women of the past, the “essence of her life” [Kollontai 1918a, pp. 8–9, 17–18, 24, 30–31].

This new woman, however, is only the embryo of the future, not the future itself — she is still, to use a later analytical language, only counternormative not yet alternormative, only opposing what is given in the now rather than embodying a still unimaginable new. The “reality” of modern capitalist existence forces women to suppress emotionality and become like men, to approach passion warily, for the woman of the past is still warring within the new woman’s soul. In love, she “fears that the power of feeling might awaken in her the sleeping atavistic inclinations to become the ‘sounding board’ of a man, might force her to surrender her own self, to abandon her ‘cause’, her calling, her life tasks”. Ideally, the woman in love is “redeemed from love’s servitude, and proudly and joyfully stretches to her full height”. But in this world as it is she must concentrate on the “struggle against ‘moral captivity’, even against outwardly free feelings. This is the rebellion of the woman of our age of transition, who has still not learned how to combine inner freedom and independence with the all-consuming power of love”. This is not yet the future. The time when a woman can embrace all the “earthly pleasures” without becoming their slave is still only becoming [Kollontai 1918a, pp. 26, 29–31].

Kollontai claimed to find the “germ” of this future in urban working-class lives: in the “crowded dwellings of the workers, where, amidst the stench and terrors beget by capitalism, amidst tears and curses, living springs find a way to emerge”. Kollontai knew the contempt and brutality with which most working-class men treated women and the submissiveness of most women. But this, she insisted, was only the lingering presence of the old, not the “active, creative” side of workers’ lives, which was leading them toward something “new”, something beyond the “monogamous-possessive family” and the subordination of women. In the fight against capitalist oppression, workers discover the necessity of comradesly solidarity and equality. This led to Kollontai’s boldest argument yet: sex was not a side issue in this proletarian struggle. Throughout history, “the sexual moral code is an integral part” of “the class ideology” of every rising class. For the working class, the new sexual morality is intimately connected to the struggle against capitalism and bourgeois rule: “only with the help of its new spiritual values, created in the depths... will this struggling class strengthen its social position; only by means of new norms and ideals can its successfully take power away from antagonistic social groups” [Kollontai 1918b, pp. 58–61].

“Life itself” led working-class women out of the home into independent work. As a result, only for a working-class woman does “the assertion of her personality [*lichnost*]”

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<sup>9</sup> See discussion [Stites 1978, pp. 348–50; Clements 1979, pp. 73–74].

coincide with the interests of her class". Proletarians discover that the old "passive female virtues" are hindrances in the struggle for social transformation, which requires a "rebellious personality challenging every form of enslavement" [Kollontai 1918a, p. 33]. Or, at least, that is how it should be. The woman should be viewed as a "self-valued human being", as a "person" (*zhenshchina-lichnost*) [Kollontai 1918a, p. 17, 29]. To realize this future, this utopian "not-yet" that challenges the present darkness with a powerful longing for the new, women will have to "fight on two fronts: against the external world and against the inclinations of her grandmothers that dwell still deeply within her" [Kollontai 1918a, p. 35].

After the Bolsheviks came to power, Kollontai was named People's Commissar of Public Welfare, which made her, she believed, "the first woman in history" to be member of a national government [Kollontai 1971, p. 35]. She looked back at these early months of "workers' government" as a time "rich in magnificent illusions, plans, ardent initiatives to improve life, to organize the world anew, months of the real romanticism of the Revolution" [Kollontai 1918a, p. 35]<sup>10</sup>. Possibilities seemed boundless. Ideas that had once been only "dreams" now had a government prepared to implement them. Hence the logic of reprinting her prewar essays on women, the family, and the new morality (gathered into a book titled *The New Morality and the Working Class*), and her 1914 pamphlet, *The Working Mother*, which described a future when a working woman would experience motherhood as a great joy and children would thrive:

"Imagine a society... where everyone does the same amount of work and society in return looks after them and eases their lives... Maternity will no longer be a cross to bear, for what will remain will be only its joyful aspects, only the great happiness of being a mother... But isn't such society a fairytale [*skazka*]? Could such a society ever really exist? The science of economics and of the history of society and the state shows that such a society must and will come into being. However hard the rich capitalists, factory owners, landowners, and property owners fight against it, this "fairytale" will become real and true. The working class all over the world is fighting to make this dream come true" [Kollontai 1914].

In 1918, she believed, the Soviet government was making this dream real. The "still unrealized future", as she had called it in 1911, seemed closer than ever before.

In a speech to the First All-Russian Congress of Worker and Peasant Women in November 1918, Kollontai presented her vision of what she had been trying to achieve as People's Commissar of Public Welfare (by then she had resigned that post in protest against the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany). She pointed to state-organized maternity homes and childcare as enabling women to work without worrying about her children or being dependent on men. And this was part of a bigger transformation in women's lives, which was itself part of a revolution of millenarian proportions: "the red flag of the social revolution... proclaims to us the approach of the heaven on earth to which humanity has been aspiring for centuries" [Farnsworth 1980, p. 144]. Of course, given the harsh economic conditions in these years and resistance to her efforts by many of her male comrades, little could be accomplished. Perhaps this was part of the reason, by Kollontai's own testimony, she "began to long for the time" when she "wasn't a people's commissar, but an ordinary party agitator travelling around the world and dreaming of revolution"

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<sup>10</sup> She deleted the phrase "magnificent illusions" before publication.

[Clements 1979, p. 130]. Resigning from the government was likely about much more than Brest-Litovsk.

Kollontai's radical "longing" and "dreaming" was also evident in her leading role in the "Workers' Opposition" in 1920–1921. Kollontai drafted a pamphlet on behalf of the Workers' Opposition in preparation for the debates for the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress around Trotsky's plans to "militarize" labor after the civil war. And she defended their criticisms of both Trotsky and Lenin as growing from a richer sense of reality and possibility. She mocked the "sober" policies of state and party leaders, the "statecraft wisdom of our ruling heights," their supposedly sensible willingness to "adapt" and "compromise". "Today we might gain something with the help of your 'sober policy' ", she imagined workers saying to Lenin and Trotsky, "but let us beware lest we find ourselves on a false road that, through turns and zigzags, will imperceptibly lead us away from the future toward the debris of the past" [Kollontai 1921b, pp. 15–16]. The only way to open up the world of "new possibilities", the only path for "the creation of new forms of production and life", is "freedom" for workers to "speak their creative new word". The demands of the Workers' Opposition, she argued, were based on this recognition of the necessity of "freedom," "self-activity," and "creativity" for workers. The party leadership, unfortunately, "distrusted" the very workers who ought to be the foundation of the "proletarian dictatorship" [Kollontai 1921b, pp. 19, 24, 33, 38–39, 47].

Communism, she warned, cannot be achieved "by the hands of Soviet officials". "It is impossible to decree communism. It can be created only through the lived experiences and desires [*zhivym iskaniem*], even if they are sometimes mistaken, and creative effort of the working class itself". This is a "simple Marxist truth" understood by "every child in Soviet Russia". Against Trotsky's argument that the problem is not bureaucracy itself but a tendency to adopt the "bad sides of bureaucratism", Kollontai answered that bureaucracy is an unambiguous "scourge," which "has seeped into the very marrow of our party and eaten through to soviet institutions," that treats "every new thought" as "heresy," that replaces the open exchange of opinions and initiative from below with "formal resolution of decisions handed down from above," that "restricts and limits at every step" the "vital initiative" of workers who alone can transform the economy with their "miracles of enthusiasm". The sooner the party leadership understands these truths, "the sooner we can step across that forbidden border [*zapovednyi rubezh*] beyond which humanity, freed from external economic laws, and with the rich and valuable knowledge of collective experience, will begin consciously to create the history of humanity in the communist epoch". The sooner, she might have said, can humanity "leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom" [Kollontai 1921b, pp. 22, 32, 35, 38–40, 48].

The "utopian form", as a way of thinking and writing, has been called a "meditation on radical difference, radical otherness", on the possibilities for a life so utterly different from this one that we cannot imagine what it will be like, for "our imaginations are hostages" to the only realities we have experienced, and so we find it hard to imagine the future except as a negation of what we reject in the past and the present [Jameson 2005, pp. xii–xvi]. Kollontai acknowledged these limits, and precisely as proof not of utopian impossibility but of how "never before seen" the future will be. Kollontai also shared the utopian conviction, as she told an American reporter in 1918, that "even if we are conquered...we are breaking the way, abolishing old ideas", and creating a legacy that others will build with [Beatty 1918, p. 380]. Years later, recognizing perhaps that so many of her ideals remained

unrealized, she would reiterate the utopian principle that criticism and struggle is more important than “accomplishment”. And even if nothing was produced beyond words and dreams, these “would come to be a historical example and help others move ahead. We worked for that time and for the future”<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *Den första etappen* (Stockholm, 1945), Kollontai's Swedish-language autobiography [Clements 1979, pp. 147–148].

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